

# The status of Chattering *Cisticola Cisticola* *anonymus* in Upper Guinea

by Jeremy A. Lindsell

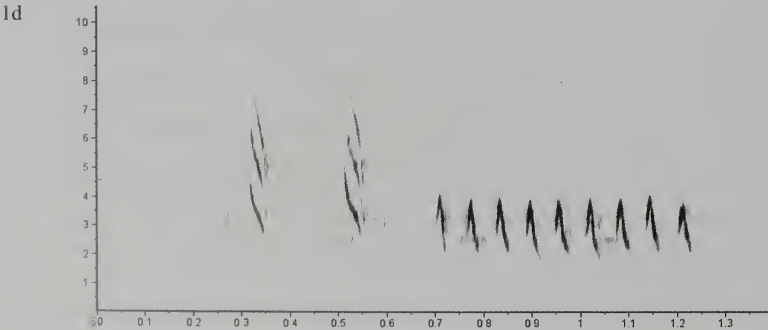
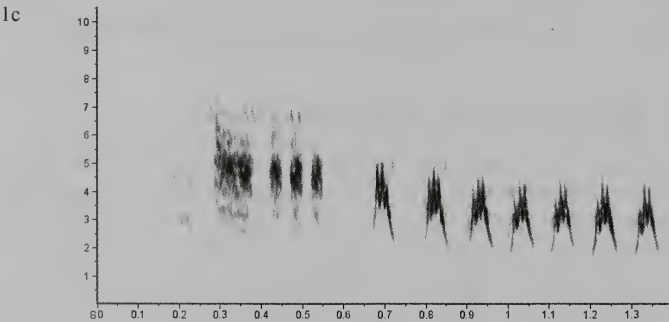
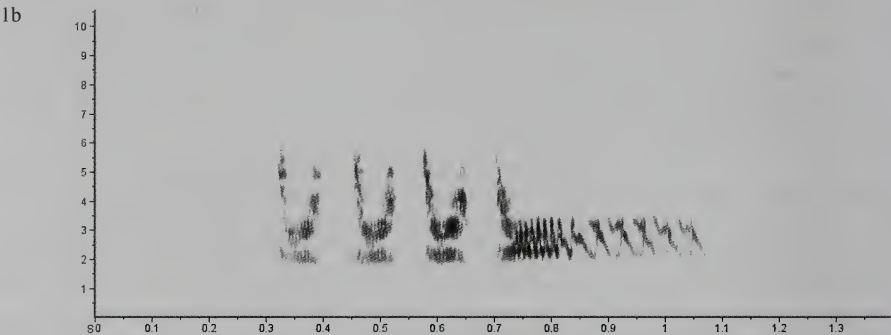
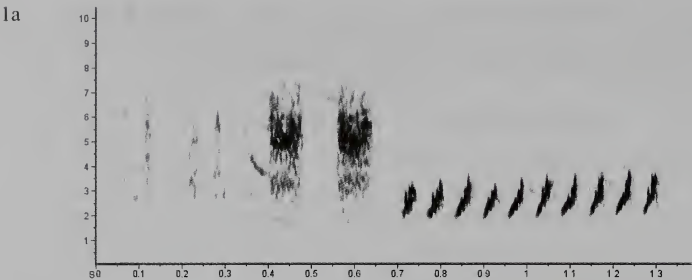
Received 26 April 2006

Chattering *Cisticola Cisticola anonymus* is common at forest edges and clearings in Lower Guinea, well known from Nigeria east to Central African Republic and south through Congo to Angola (Dowsett & Forbes-Watson 1993). However, its status in Upper Guinea has been unclear for many years with a longstanding question mark over records from Sierra Leone and Ghana. Most authorities (Bannerman 1939, 1953, Lynes 1930, 1932, 1934, Mayr & Cottrell 1986) do not include Upper Guinea in the range, whereas Sharpe (1883) and Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1973) included Ghana, and Bannerman (1921, though see below) and Urban *et al.* (1997) Sierra Leone. The latter was somewhat circumspect as to the precise identity of birds in Sierra Leone, which uncertainty was repeated by Borrow & Demey (2001) and Ryan (2006). Other commentators concluded earlier records from Sierra Leone to be unconfirmed and thus unacceptable (Dowsett & Forbes-Watson 1993) or doubtful so perhaps best deleted (Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire 1993). The first unequivocal claim from Sierra Leone (Allport *et al.* 1989) lacks any supporting details. Despite such disagreement, it seems that *C. anonymus* does occur in Upper Guinea, in Sierra Leone, but not in Ghana. Here I clarify the published and specimen record, and provide details of field observations from Sierra Leone.

## The published and specimen record

Debate has partially arisen from confusion over a specimen collected in Sierra Leone in 1920. Two papers appeared in *Ibis* in 1921 reporting *Cisticola rufopileata* from Sierra Leone (Bannerman 1921, Lowe & Bannerman 1921). At the time, this name was in use for *C. anonymus* (though not exclusively so: R. J. Dowsett *in litt.* 2006) and it appears likely that this is what was being referred. The papers were not cited by Lynes (1930, 1932, 1934) who otherwise knew of no record of *C. anonymus* from Sierra Leone, and Bannerman (1939) did not provide subsequent clarification.

The *Ibis* papers both refer to a skin collected by W. P. Lowe on 6 March 1920. The report of Lowe's trip was prepared by Bannerman, with field notes by Lowe, and therein Bannerman listed the record as a first for the country. The specimen is held at the Natural History Museum (NHM), Tring (accession number 1920.6.15.76 and listed as *C. rufopileata* [syn. *C. anonyma* and *C. anonymus*] in the accession register), but is clearly a Singing *Cisticola C. cantans* (see Appendix). On the specimen label the original *rufopileata* is deleted in pencil, and *swanzii* (a subspecies of *C. cantans*) written on the reverse in ink (though not in Lynes' hand). Lynes (1930) referred to a skin of *C. cantans* collected in March, in Sierra Leone, and listed W. P. Lowe as a collector of *C. cantans* skins. However, he provided no



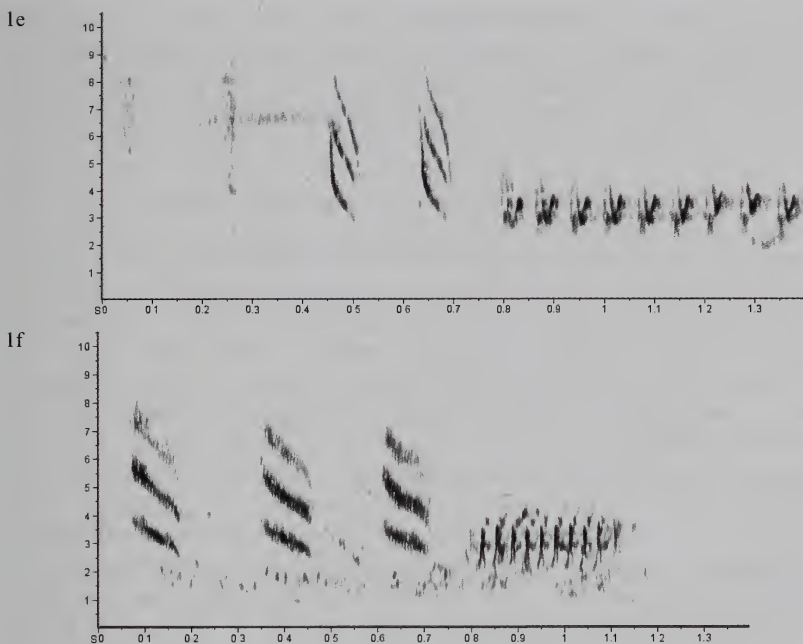


Figure 1. Sonograms of the song of Chattering Cisticola *Cisticola anonymus*. Units are seconds on X axis and kHz on Y axis. a) first cut from Chappuis (2000). This recording sounds most similar to birds in Sierra Leone. b) second cut from Chappuis (2000). The churr in this individual is more rapid than in the others. c) third cut from Chappuis (2000). d) first individual recorded near Kenema, Sierra Leone, August 2006. e) second individual recorded near Pewa, Sierra Leone, September 2005. f) third individual recorded near Pewa, Sierra Leone, September 2005. Sonograms produced in Raven Lite 1.0 (Cornell Lab. of Ornithology).

indication that this was a reidentification, nor did he explicitly correct Bannerman. He also did not mention any *C. anonymus* skins from Sierra Leone.

Since Lynes (1930, cited verbatim in Bannerman 1939) became *the* authority on the distribution of the species for many years, Bannerman's earlier reports were superseded. Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire (1993) noted Bannerman's (1921) report but nonetheless concluded that there was no certain record from Sierra Leone. What is clear now is that there never was any specimen of *C. anonymus* from Sierra Leone, making Lynes's (1930) position correct and Allport *et al.* (1989) the first unequivocal claim for the country.

The situation in Ghana is less easily resolved. There are two specimens of *C. anonymus* at NHM (1886.6.24.219, 1886.6.24.220), collected by Maxwell Hyslop. The labels give their location as 'Gold Coast' (i.e. Ghana) with a later annotation of 'probably not, but S. Nigeria', whilst the collector's label states 'West African Coast' and gives the authority as 'Oil Palm Ships'. The skins were originally in the collection of Sir W. Jardine, who (Jardine 1849) referred to their having arrived

courtesy of the Liverpool Oil Palm Ships and stated their provenance as the Old Calabar River, in present-day southern Nigeria. Earlier, Jardine (1846) referred to Hyslop's specimens as coming from the Old Calabar and the Bonny rivers, the latter also in southern Nigeria. Furthermore, though Sharpe (1883) was published too early to mention the Jardine specimens, an annotation in the British Museum's copy details two skins of *C. ruficapilla* (a preoccupied name that became *rufopileata* and refers to *anonymus*), collected by Hyslop and from the Jardine collection, from 'Old Calabar'. In sum, strong evidence is available that these specimens are from southern Nigeria and not Ghana. Perhaps Mackworth-Praed & Grant (1973) based the species' range on these skins' labels prior to their being amended. However, Sharpe (1883) also described the range of *C. anonymus* as 'West Africa from the Gold Coast to Gaboon', though his basis is unclear. So there remains an older authority that includes Ghana in the range of *C. anonymus*, but no subsequent records are available (Grimes 1987) despite extensive surveys of suitable habitat (R. J. Dowsett *in litt.* 2006).

Although my analysis eliminates any acceptable record of *C. anonymus* for Sierra Leone and Upper Guinea, those with field experience in the region have been aware for some time of the presence in south-east Sierra Leone of birds matching *C. anonymus*. Allport *et al.* (1989) reported the species in Gola Forest and Urban *et al.* (1997) a personal communication from G. Field relating to the same area. They were, nonetheless, circumspect stating that 'birds *referred* to this species locally frequent SE Sierra Leone' (*italics mine*). Dowsett & Dowsett-Lemaire (1993) considered the Allport *et al.* (1989) record insufficiently documented, bearing in mind that they were claiming a range extension of c.1,500 km, of a difficult-to-identify species, with no supporting details.

## Field observations in Sierra Leone

On 29 September 2005 a bird was observed singing from bushes at the edge of wet rice fields c.1 km north of the village of Pewa (07°21'N, 11°17'W), Kenema District, and adjacent to the boundary of Gola West Forest Reserve. It was immediately recognised as a *C. anonymus*-type song and brief views confirmed the bird as a medium-sized, plain-backed cisticola. Broadcasting the recording of *C. anonymus* from Chappuis (2000) resulted in a bird responding immediately and flying from a distance of c.100 m to within 15 m, permitting clear views and sound-recordings to be made. At least three pairs were noted in the overgrown rice fields.

### *Habitat*

The birds occupied rank growth on the bunds between the wet rice fields, which covered an area of 10–20 ha and were surrounded by farmbrush in varying stages of regeneration. There did not appear to be any birds occupying a natural grassy swamp on the opposite side of the road. The swamp lacked the small bushes present around the rice fields.

### **Behaviour**

The birds frequented low vegetation and sang from perches atop the vegetation. Once disturbed by playback, they moved to higher perches where they sang with tails cocked and displayed prominently.

### **Voice**

The song consisted of four types of note. The main phrase started with 1–3 harsh notes, followed by 2–3 higher pitched chirps, and concluded with a fruity rattling churr or trill. The overall phrase was sometimes interspersed with a short churr: *shrit shrit chirip chirip chrrrrrrrrrrrr... chrchrchr... shrit shrit chirip chirip chrrrrrrrrrrrr*. The final rattling churr was the most distinctive part whilst the timing and composition of the introductory notes varied in speed and length with individuals. The song was similar to Rattling Cisticola *C. chiniana* and the rattling churr reminiscent of Winding Cisticola *C. galactotes*. Sonograms are presented (Fig. 1) of the introductory notes and the characteristic churr for three individuals from south-east Sierra Leone, and compared with recordings from Chappuis (2000).

### **Description**

*General.* A medium to large grey-brown cisticola with a plain back, whitish underparts, black bill and gape, and rufous-brown crown and upper nape.

*Upperparts.* Forehead, crown and upper nape dull rufous-brown. Lower nape graded into plain grey (brown-tinged) back. Wing-panel (fringes to the secondaries) did not obviously contrast with back. Upper tail similar to back and had terminal pale spots with slight darkening of the base colour adjacent to the pale.

*Underparts.* Throat creamy white contrasting slightly with pale greyish wash on breast. Strong grey wash to flanks contrasting with off-white belly. Distinctly rufous thighs.

*Face.* Darkish lores and an obvious pale supraloral spot that graded into a supercilium fading shortly behind eye. Ear-coverts rather indistinctly coloured but not clearly rufous.

*Bare parts.* Bill strong and all black; gape all black; orange irides; legs and feet pale, pinkish in tone.

This description matches the skins of *C. anonymus* held at NHM and the illustrations in Lynes (1930) and Ryan (2006). Subsequently, records have come to light from other visiting birdwatchers (I. Sinclair pers. comm., A. Hester *in litt.* 2006) and the species has been found to be quite common at the edges of Gola Forest (E. Klop pers. comm.) and as far north-west as Kenema at least.

## **Discussion**

If these birds are *C. anonymus* we face a quite remarkable situation: despite the gap in its range of c.1,500 km, *C. anonymus* was claimed in Sierra Leone on the basis



of a misclassified specimen, when over 80 years later, it was found there after all. Given the apparent isolation, it is possible the Sierra Leone population will show racially distinct characters and may even prove to be specifically distinct, though observations do not currently suggest this; a more detailed examination is required. Several other birds are restricted to Upper Guinea (Stattersfield *et al.* 1998), so if this is a distinct population it would not be unique in the region. However, few passerines display such a large gap in their range across their West African distribution. It seems unlikely that the species persists in Ghana or Côte d'Ivoire given the coverage by birdwatchers and surveys in recent years. It is hard to understand why *C. anonymus* is not widespread across the entire Upper Guinea forest zone as it does not appear to occupy very rare or specialised habitat. However, there is a strong possibility that it will be found in western Liberia as the site in Sierra Leone is less than 15 km from the border.

The confusion over the early record is hard to resolve. The specimen bears little resemblance to those of *C. anonymus*, though prior to Lynes (1930) there was much confusion in cisticola taxonomy and nomenclature.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to Bob Dowsett and Françoise Dowsett-Lemaire for their critical comments and for their introduction to the older literature; Lincoln Fishpool for locating the Sierra Leone specimen at Tring; Richard Dean for helping to locate the same specimen and drawing attention to those from Ghana; Robert Prŷs-Jones and Effie Warr for boundless assistance in the collection and library at NHM; and the staff of the Gola Forest Conservation Concession Programme for their field assistance.

### References:

- Allport, G., Ausden, M., Hayman, P. V., Robertson, P. & Wood, P. 1989. *The conservation of the birds of Gola Forest, Sierra Leone*. International Council for Bird Preservation, Cambridge, UK.
- Bannerman, D. A. 1921. A systematic list of the birds of Sierra Leone. *Ibis* (11)3: 283–302.
- Bannerman, D. A. 1939. *Birds of tropical West Africa*, vol. 5. Crown Agents, London.
- Bannerman, D. A. 1953. *The birds of West and Equatorial Africa*, vol. 2. Oliver & Boyd, Edinburgh & London.
- Bannerman, D. A. & Lowe, W. P. 1921. The birds of Tasso and adjoining islands of the Rokelle River, Sierra Leone. *Ibis* (11)3: 265–282.
- Borrow, N. & Demey, R. 2001. *Birds of western Africa*. Christopher Helm, London.
- Chappuis, C. 2000. *African birds sounds: birds of north, west and central Africa*. Société d'Études Ornithologiques de France, Paris & British Library National Sound Archive, London.
- Dowsett, R. J. & Dowsett-Lemaire, F. (eds.) 1993. *A contribution to the distribution and taxonomy of Afrotropical and Malagasy birds*. Tauraco Research Rep. No. 5. Tauraco Press, Liège.
- Dowsett, R. J. & Forbes-Watson, A. D. 1993. *Checklist of birds of the Afrotropical and Malagasy regions*, vol. 1. Tauraco Press, Liège.
- Grimes, L. G. 1987. *The birds of Ghana: an annotated checklist*. British Ornithologists' Union, London.
- Jardine, W. 1846. Notice of some birds from West Africa. *Horae Zoologicae* (7). *Ann. & Mag. Nat. Hist.* 17(13): 85–88.
- Jardine, W. 1849. Notes on the habitat of some birds, collected on the coast of Western Africa by C. A. Gordon. Pp. 1–13 in Jardine, W. (ed.) *Contributions to ornithology for 1849*. Lizars, Edinburgh.
- Lynes, H. 1930. Review of the genus *Cisticola*. *Ibis* (12)6: spec. suppl.
- Lynes, H. 1932. *Sierra Leone cisticolas*. Govt. Printers, Freetown.
- Lynes, H. & Sclater, W. L. 1934. Lynes-Vincent tour in Central and West Africa in 1930–31. *Ibis* (13)6: 1–5.

- Mackworth-Praed, C. W. & Grant, C. H. B. 1973. *Birds of west-central and western Africa*, vol. 2. Longman, London.
- Mayr, E. & Cottrell, G. W. (eds.) 1986. *Checklist of the birds of the world*, vol. 11. Harvard Univ. Press, Cambridge, MA.
- Ryan, P. G. 2006. Family Cisticolidae (cisticolas and allies). Pp. 378–490 in del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A. & Christie, D. A. (eds.) *Handbook of the birds of the world*, vol. 11. Lynx Edicions, Barcelona.
- Sharpe, R. B. 1883. *Catalogue of the Passeriformes or perching birds in the collection of the British Museum*, vol. 7b. Trustees of the Brit. Mus., London.
- Stattersfield, A. J., Crosby, M. J., Long, A. J. & Wege, D. C. 1998. *Endemic Bird Areas of the world: priorities for biodiversity conservation*. BirdLife International, Cambridge, UK.
- Urban, E. K., Fry, C. H. & Keith, S. (eds.) 1997. *The birds of Africa*, vol. 5. Academic Press, London.

Address: Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds. SG19 2DL, UK, e-mail: jeremy.lindsell@rspb.org.uk

## APPENDIX

### Description of specimen 1920.6.15.76

Since no formal reidentification has been published of the original specimen from Sierra Leone, it is worth detailing the basis for considering it to be *C. cantans*. The label indicates that it is a male.

*General*. Much smaller and paler than the larger, darker *C. anonymus* specimens held at NHM. Remiges softer in texture with rounder tips than *C. anonymus*.

*Upperparts*. Forehead, crown and nape reddish brown. Back and rump grey-brown. Upper tail brown with dark brown-black subterminal spots and contrasting dirty white tips. Closed wing has distinct reddish-brown panel formed by fringes to secondaries.

*Underparts*. Pale creamy white chin to belly, throat slightly whiter, belly to vent buff, thighs orangey brown.

*Head*. Cheek warm brown, sides of neck grey, lores not dark, no marked supercilium.

*Bare parts*. Label indicates upper mandible black, lower mandible greyish, irides pale brown, eyelids pale brown and feet flesh-coloured. The specimen appears to have a slightly yellowish base to the lower mandible.

*Measurements*. Wing 54 mm, tarsus 20.1 mm.

*C. anonymus* lacks a reddish-brown wing-panel and has distinctly grey flanks. Singing Cisticola *C. erythrops* has a distinctly rufous face and lacks the reddish-brown wing-panel. Whistling Cisticola *C. lateralis* lacks the contrasting reddish-brown top to the head and wing-panel. Measurements for *C. anonymus* and *C. cantans swanzii* (Urban *et al.* 1997) are shown in Table 1. These reveal that if the specimen is a male then it falls in the range of *C. cantans* and not *C. anonymus*.

TABLE 1  
Wing- and tarsus-lengths (mm) of *C. anonymus* and *C. cantans* (Urban *et al.* 1997).

	Wing	Tarsus
Male <i>C. cantans</i>	52–58	19–22
Male <i>C. anonymus</i>	60–63	22–24
Female <i>C. cantans</i>	48–52	19–22
Female <i>C. anonymus</i>	52–56	21–22